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THE ROLE OF EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS IN ENHANCING WORKFORCE RESILIENCE AND ADAPTABILITY IN A DISTRESSED ECONOMY

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Abstract

In distressed economies characterized by unemployment, inflation, technological disruption, and global uncertainties, employability skills have become critical for fostering workforce resilience and adaptability. This paper explores how competencies such as problem-solving, critical thinking, communication, teamwork, adaptability, and digital literacy enable individuals to withstand economic shocks, navigate job transitions, and sustain career growth in dynamic labour markets. It highlights how economic challenges intensify the demand for workers who can embrace lifelong learning, leverage both soft and technical skills, and adapt quickly to evolving roles. The discussion positions employability skills as survival tools, examining their role in resilience, adaptability and workforce sustainability, while also considering stakeholder perspectives and implications. The paper argues that individuals, employers, and policymakers share a collective responsibility to prioritize skill development in addressing graduate unemployment, bridging skills gaps, and enhancing national productivity. Ultimately, it concludes that deliberate investment in employability skills is essential not only for individual career success but also for sustaining organizational competitiveness and strengthening long-term economic resilience in a volatile global environment.

Keywords: Employability skills, workforce resilience, adaptability, distressed economy, labour market

Introduction

Education is widely recognized as a vehicle of change and a vital driver of individual, community, and national development. Beyond imparting knowledge, it fosters skills, abilities, and values essential for personal growth and societal progress (Orji, 2013). Higher education institutions, in particular, are expected to equip students not only with academic knowledge but also with workplace competencies through internships, practical exposure, and skill-building opportunities (Paterson, 2017). However, a persistent gap remains between the skills provided by universities and the competencies employers demand, resulting in employability challenges for graduates (Bano & Vasantha, 2019).

In today's dynamic and unpredictable global economy, theoretical knowledge alone is insufficient for career success. Employers increasingly demand employability skills, also referred to as transferable, generic, or soft skills, which include communication, problem-solving, teamwork, ICT proficiency, creativity, and critical thinking (McGunagle & Zizka, 2020; Awofala et al., 2017). These skills enable individuals not only to secure employment but also to adapt to changing job requirements and contribute effectively to organizational growth.

The realities of a distressed economy, often marked by unemployment, inflation, job insecurity, and technological disruptions, have further underscored the need for employability skills (Pardo-Garcia & Barac, 2020). Workers today face heightened uncertainty that threatens career sustainability and financial stability. In such an environment, employability skills function as survival

tools, empowering individuals to transition across roles, embrace innovation, and explore entrepreneurial opportunities. Equally critical are resilience and adaptability. Rapid technological changes render technical expertise obsolete, and global crises such as recessions, pandemics, and natural disasters demand swift adjustments. These attributes are now indispensable. Resilience, the capacity to recover from setbacks, and adaptability, the ability to adjust to new roles and contexts, have become essential for workforce competitiveness at individual, organizational, and national levels (Lim et al., 2020).

The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of employability skills in strengthening workforce resilience and adaptability within distressed economies. It contends that individuals who develop strong employability skills are better positioned to navigate economic disruptions, remain relevant in evolving labour markets, and contribute meaningfully to the competitiveness of both organizations and nations.

Clarification of Concepts

Employability Skills as Survival Tools

A growing body of research highlights the critical role of employability skills in preparing students and workers to thrive in volatile and distressed economies. These skills encompass knowledge, abilities, and personal attributes that enable individuals to pursue suitable occupations and achieve success. Oluwalola (2023) defined employability as the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and experience required not only to secure employment but also to perform effectively. Beyond job acquisition, employability also serves as a measure of individual competence in sustaining high performance.

International research reinforces this perspective. Boden and Nedeva (2010) observed that universities in the United Kingdom increasingly prioritize leadership, creative thinking, and communication, reflecting the demand for transferable competencies beyond academic knowledge. Similarly, Oliver et al. (2011), in their study of Australian accounting academics, emphasized analytical thinking, writing, and practical work-related understanding, underscoring the importance of academic–industry linkages in preparing students for smooth transitions into the labour market. In Greece, Asonitou (2015) reported that accounting instructors placed strong emphasis on numerical, ICT, and critical thinking skills, suggesting that technical and cognitive skills remain fundamental to employability. Paterson (2017), drawing on international perspectives, extended this argument by highlighting communication, teamwork, presentation, and strategic vision as essential global requirements for graduate employability. Together, these studies reveal a shared recognition across different contexts that employability requires both transferable soft skills and discipline-specific technical knowledge.

Within the Nigerian context, similar concerns have emerged. Orji (2013) stressed the importance of ICT proficiency, problem-solving, and numerical competence, urging institutions to foster learning environments that nurture these abilities. Stuart et al. (2014) reinforced this position, showing that both lecturers and workplace supervisors value problem-solving and self-management skills, thereby reflecting a consensus between academia and industry on the importance of transferable competencies. Linking these findings to international evidence, it becomes clear that while contextual priorities may differ slightly, there is global agreement that equipping students with adaptable, cross-cutting skills is central to their employability and long-term career resilience.

More recent scholarships emphasize adaptability in the labour market. Agrawal and Dasgupta (2018) argued that theoretical knowledge alone is inadequate, advocating for evolving employability skills to enhance career prospects. Similarly, Bano and Vasantha (2019) underscored the joint

responsibility of faculty and students in closing skills gaps. Pardo-Garcia and Barac (2020) further highlighted entrepreneurial, innovative, and collaborative abilities, noting their role in strengthening students' resilience and adaptability in uncertain labour markets.

Drawing from both international and Nigerian perspectives, it is evident that employability skills function not merely as desirable attributes but as survival tools, enabling individuals to secure employment, remain adaptable, and sustain long-term career success in increasingly unstable economies.

Employability Skills as Drivers of Resilience

There is a noticeable gap between the outcomes of higher education institutions and the demands of the labour market. Employers highlight several concerns when recruiting graduates, including misconceptions about workplace realities, insufficient core, language, digital, and professional skills, weak ethical standards, and a tendency toward high turnover. In times of economic distress, employability skills serve as critical tools for fostering both psychological and professional resilience. Beyond technical knowledge, soft and transferable skills such as communication, problem-solving, teamwork, adaptability, creativity, and digital literacy help individuals withstand uncertainties, reposition themselves in the labour market, and explore new opportunities for survival and growth. These skills enable workers to adjust to changing circumstances, recover quickly from setbacks, and remain productive despite external shocks such as inflation, unemployment, or job insecurity.

The significance of employability skills in fostering resilience has been consistently emphasized in global scholarship. For instance, Boden and Nedeva (2010) noted the importance of leadership, creativity, and communication in enhancing graduate outcomes, while Oliver et al. (2011) highlighted analytical thinking and work-related practical knowledge. Similarly, Paterson (2017) underlined teamwork, communication, and strategic vision as vital for coping with professional challenges in uncertain environments. These studies consistently suggest that workers who possess such competencies are better positioned to thrive in volatile economies.

Akanji and Baderinwa (2021) examined the need to reskill the Nigerian labour force. They introduced the concept of prosilience as a proactive form of resilience that enables workers to adapt to new realities, especially in the face of automation and technological disruptions. Their findings emphasized that Nigerian employees must embrace continuous learning to remain relevant in a rapidly evolving labour market. Similarly, Medun and Bello (2024) investigated vocational skills training in Lagos State and found a strong positive correlation between skills acquisition, employability, and job creation. This suggests that developing vocational and transferable skills not only enhances resilience at the individual level but also contributes to broader socio-economic stability. Ebiringa et al. (2024) further proposed an employability model for Nigerian graduates that integrates work-integrated learning, critical thinking, and long-term adaptability, arguing that these qualities are essential for overcoming graduate unemployment and building workforce resilience. **Collectively, these studies** emphasized **that resilience in the Nigerian labour market is closely tied to a proactive acquisition of employability skills, continuous learning, and adaptability to disruptive forces.**

These insights are echoed in practical experiences from Nigeria, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent economic recession, many young Nigerians relied on digital literacy, entrepreneurial skills, and adaptability to survive. The rapid rise of the gig economy in Lagos and Abuja, where workers transitioned into

freelance jobs such as digital marketing, web design, content creation, and online tutoring, demonstrates how employability skills can provide alternative livelihoods when traditional employment collapses. Similarly, the growth of tech hubs like Yaba's "Silicon Lagoon" showcases how creativity, innovation, and teamwork enable Nigerian youth to create start-ups that thrive even in distressed economic conditions. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) have also leveraged problem-solving and adaptability to diversify business models; for example, restaurants pivoted to online food delivery during lockdowns, and artisans used social media platforms to sell products directly to consumers.

The undermentioned examples highlighted that employability skills are not merely workplace requirements but survival tools in distressed economies. Workers equipped with these skills can transition across industries, innovate in response to emerging challenges, and sustain relevance in an unpredictable labour market. Thus, fostering such competencies within higher education and professional training remains a vital strategy for strengthening workforce resilience in Nigeria and beyond. Baradei and Kadry (2022) said that the more an economy thrives, the more jobs will be available; and the more the quality of education improves in HE institutions, the more graduates will be, not only fit for the available jobs but also able to create jobs themselves.

Adaptability as a Driver of Workforce Sustainability

Within contemporary labour markets marked by volatility and disruption, adaptability has emerged as a defining factor for workforce sustainability. Employability skills, often described as soft or transferable skills, are non-technical competencies that complement technical expertise and enable individuals to respond effectively to change, collaborate with others, and remain productive in uncertain environments. These skills, which include problem-solving, critical thinking, communication, teamwork, and digital literacy, equip workers not only to meet current responsibilities but also to transition into new roles and industries as circumstances demand.

Problem-solving and critical thinking are particularly valuable in distressed economies, where workers encounter challenges such as job losses, inflationary pressures, and organizational restructuring. Employees who can analyze situations, generate solutions, and make informed decisions are better positioned to withstand economic shocks (Oliver et al., 2011). Similarly, communication and teamwork enhance resilience by creating collaborative environments where shared responsibility supports collective problem-solving. Digital literacy has also become indispensable, particularly in Nigeria, where many businesses and individuals leverage digital platforms to sustain income through online commerce, remote work, and gig economy opportunities (Medun & Bello, 2024). While digital skills provide essential tools, adaptability ensures sustained relevance in rapidly shifting labour markets.

Adaptability is increasingly tied to the concept of lifelong learning. As technological disruptions and globalization reshape industries, workers must continuously update their competencies to remain relevant. Scholars have argued that adaptability is no longer a complementary skill but a necessity in distressed economies where traditional career paths are unstable (Akanji & Baderinwa, 2021). The Nigerian experience illustrates this vividly: graduates and employees who embrace lifelong learning and reskilling are better positioned to shift across sectors, sustain employability, and contribute to organizational survival despite high unemployment rates and economic volatility (Ebiringa et al., 2024). However, employability skills play a vital role in enabling career mobility and lifelong learning. These skills not only enhance individual resilience but also promote workforce sustainability by ensuring that employees can adapt to emerging realities, safeguard their relevance, and support their organizations in navigating turbulence. **Viewed holistically, these skills are interconnected and work together, as illustrated in Figure 1.**

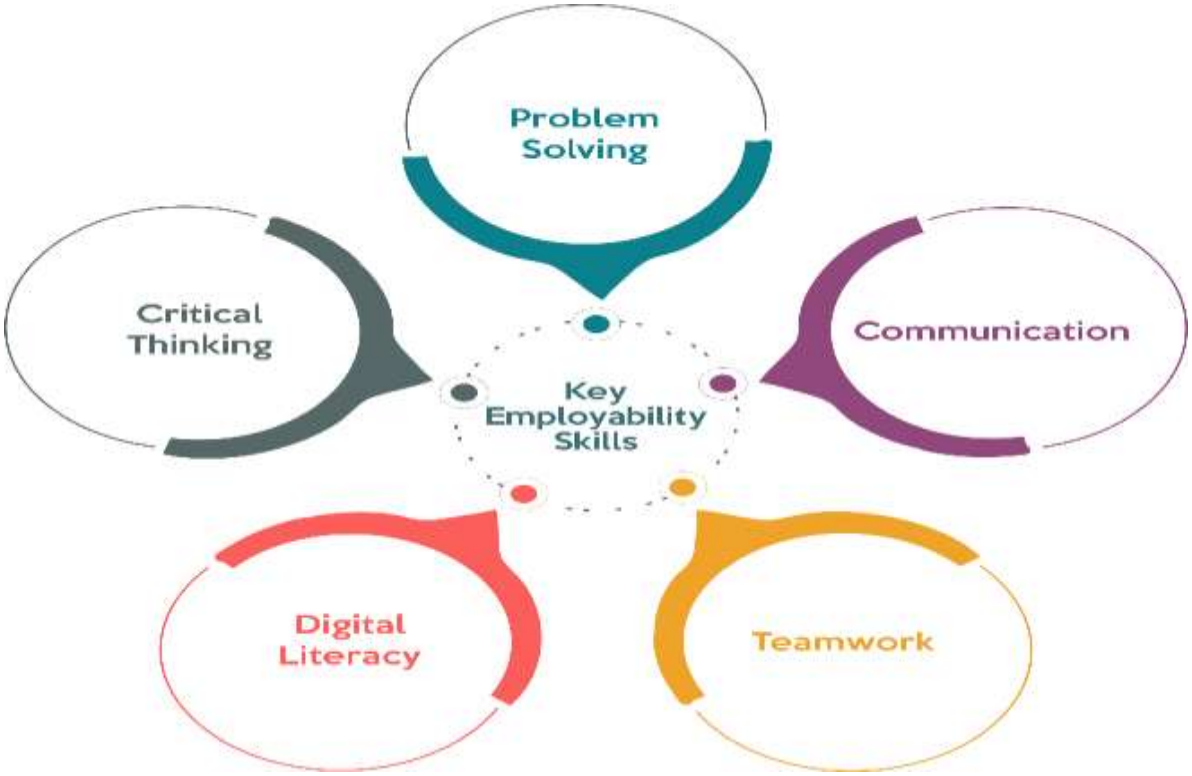

Figure 1. Key Employability Skills for Workforce Adaptability

This diagram highlights the core employability skills: problem-solving, critical thinking, communication, teamwork, and digital literacy, which serve as essential tools for workforce sustainability. These skills are interconnected, enabling individuals to adapt to new roles, embrace lifelong learning, and remain resilient in distressed economies.

Stakeholder Perspectives and Implications

The realities of distressed economies and rapidly evolving labour markets highlight the shared responsibility of individuals, employers, and policymakers/educators to strengthen employability skills. Each group of stakeholders plays a critical role in preparing a resilient workforce capable of navigating economic shocks and sustaining long-term growth. Their contributions are discussed below:

Individuals: Proactive Upskilling and Mindset Change: In the face of technological disruption, inflationary pressures, and rising unemployment, individuals can no longer rely solely on academic qualifications to secure and sustain employment. Instead, they must adopt a proactive approach to continuous learning and personal development. Core employability skills such as communication, problem-solving, adaptability, teamwork, and digital literacy must be consciously cultivated (Orji, 2013; Paterson, 2017). Awofala et al. (2017) emphasized that students should embrace lifelong learning as a mindset, recognizing that employability extends beyond securing the first job to sustaining long-term career mobility. Workers who actively pursue new skills, leverage digital platforms, and demonstrate resilience are more likely to thrive during economic downturns and transitions (Lim et al., 2020).

Employers: Prioritizing Employability Skills in Recruitment and Development: Employers increasingly recognize that technical expertise alone does not guarantee productivity or innovation.

A growing body of research highlights the importance of soft and transferable skills in building high-performing teams (Boden & Nedeva, 2010; Saeed & Rashidi, 2017). In the Nigerian context, employers in banking, ICT, and service industries now prioritize communication, teamwork, leadership, and adaptability during recruitment and appraisal processes (Bano & Vasantha, 2019). Beyond recruitment, organizations must also invest in continuous staff training and professional development to bridge the persistent skills gap and enhance resilience within their workforce (Agrawal & Dasgupta, 2018). By embedding employability skills into workplace training, employers not only improve organizational competitiveness but also contribute to broader workforce sustainability.

Policymakers and Educators: Integrating Employability Skills into Education and Workforce Development: At the policy and educational levels, addressing the skills mismatch requires systemic reform. Higher education institutions must go beyond traditional subject knowledge by embedding employability skills into curricula through internships, project-based learning, and industry–academia partnerships (Oliver et al., 2011; Stuart et al., 2014; Oluwalola, 2022). Nigerian policymakers have also stressed the need to strengthen Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) as a driver of skill acquisition for national development (Adebakin & Raimi, 2012). Bano and Vasantha (2019) argued that bridging the gap between academia and industry requires joint responsibility, where professors, institutions, and government agencies collaborate to design workforce development programs that are relevant, innovative, and future-oriented. Furthermore, with the expansion of the digital economy, policymakers must prioritize ICT training, entrepreneurial education, and employability-focused reforms to prepare students and job seekers for both local and global labour markets (Pardo-Garcia & Barac, 2020).

An examination of stakeholder perspectives reveals that the cultivation of employability skills is most effective when pursued as a collaborative responsibility across all levels of society. Individuals must commit to lifelong learning and adaptability, employers must embed skill development into organizational culture, and policymakers and educators must integrate employability competencies into curricula and national workforce strategies. Only through this coordinated effort can the persistent gap between education and labour market demands be narrowed. Strengthening this tripartite collaboration is therefore essential for reducing graduate unemployment, enhancing workforce adaptability, and securing long-term economic resilience in distressed and rapidly changing environments.

Conclusion

Employability skills are fundamental to building a resilient workforce that can adapt to economic disruptions. Core competencies such as critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, teamwork, adaptability, and digital literacy equip individuals to remain relevant, transition across roles, and contribute to organizational recovery. In Nigeria, where graduate unemployment persists as a significant challenge, embedding employability skills into higher education and workforce development programmes is particularly urgent. Prioritizing these skills will not only enhance individual career trajectories but also foster national productivity and long-term economic sustainability.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made:

i. Employers should check skills gaps often and provide training that combines technical know-how with employability skills like digital literacy, communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. This keeps workers adaptable to industry changes.

ii. Mentoring, peer networks, and teamwork platforms should be encouraged. These help workers build resilience, share ideas, and handle workplace challenges better.

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